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*Edited by Jacob Vellian*

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**Syriac Dialogue Hymns**

Professor SEBASTIAN BROCK

Oxford

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### **SYRIAC DIALOGUE HYMNS**

By

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## **FOUR SYRIAC DIALOGUE HYMNS**

During the early centuries of their existence the Syriac Churches developed a characteristic type of hymn containing a dialogue between two biblical characters. Over forty such dialogue hymns survive, though only a few still remain in liturgical use - often in a curtailed form. These lively poems combine humour with theological instruction and they would be well worth reviving for modern catechetical use in schools and elsewhere.

The genre happens to be a very ancient one and long before Syriac writers took it up and christianized it, the dialogue disputation had been a favourite literary form in ancient Mesopotamia ever since the second millennium BC, written first in Sumerian and then in Akkadian.

The earliest Syriac author known to have used the dispute poem was St Ephrem (c. 306-373), among whose large body of hymns are a number of lively dialogues between Death and Satan, where each claims to wield the greater power over humanity - only to discover that Christ's power, at his descent into the underworld, overcomes them both. The majority of Syriac dialogue hymns, however, are anonymous. In all probability these mostly date from the fifth and sixth centuries AD, although a few clearly belong to a later period and show features of poetic techniques not known in Syriac until the Middle Ages. It is interesting that the literary form was also taken over by medieval Arabic and Persian writers, among whom it enjoyed great popularity.

Most of the Syriac dialogue hymns were composed for liturgical use over the course of the

liturgical year, in particular for the seasons of Annunciation, Nativity, Epiphany, and Holy Week. It is to these particular periods that the four hymns translated here belong.

### **(1) Zechariah and the Angel**

Luke 1:5-25, relates the episode of the angel Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah that his barren wife Elizabeth would bear a child in old age. In the Gospel text it is not stated that Zechariah was High Priest, but this came to be assumed to be the case by many later writers; this identification enabled them to identify the occasion of his entry into the Temple as the Day of Atonement – the one day in the year when the High Priest made his entry into the Holy of Holies. Since the Day of Atonement fell on the 10th of the lunar month Tishri (approximately October), it was then deduced, on the basis of the 'sixth month' in Luke 1:26, that the Annunciation took place on 10th Nisan (approximately April).

The dialogue between the angel and Zechariah well illustrates the conflict between reason and faith: Zechariah's reaction to the angel's astonishing message is based entirely on the dictates of reason and common sense: his wife is barren, and in any case she is well beyond the age of childbearing; miracles may have taken place in the past, as in the case of Sarah, but there is no reason to suppose that they will take place today. Zechariah holds out stubbornly to the last – and as a result his tongue was bound (Luke 1:22).

### **(2) The Angel and Mary**

The conflict between reason and faith is also to be found in the dialogue between the angel and Mary. The dialogue brings out very effectively the

initial hesitation which Mary must have felt when confronted by this stranger and his astounding words. Significantly it is only when he mentions the coming of the Holy Spirit (verse 35) that Mary finally accepts that the message is indeed from God: it is at this point that faith finally overcome the claims of reason.

### **(3) John the Baptist and Our Lord**

The Baptism of Christ in the river Jordan, celebrated at Epiphany, followed the period of John the Baptist's preaching of repentance in the wilderness. Syriac writers often saw this as the time when John, acting as the 'Friend of the Bridegroom' (John 3:29), betrothed the Church to Christ the Bridegroom. But when Christ actually turns up to be baptized John has cold feet (Matthew 3:14), and it is this moment of hesitation that is expanded and embroidered upon in the dialogue hymn between John the Baptist and Christ. In the course of the dialogue the true purpose of Christ's baptism is brought out in various different ways.

### **(4) The Cherub and the Thief**

The starting point for this dialogue is to be found in Christ's words to the repentant thief on the cross, 'This day you shall be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43). Once he had died, the thief accordingly found himself at the gate to Paradise, but the Cherub who guards the entrance with the revolving flaming sword (Genesis 3:24) refuses to let the thief in: he (the Cherub) has received instructions not to allow any human being into Paradise, and he is as yet unaware of the new order of things, effected by the death of Christ on the Cross: the piercing of Christ's side by the lance (John 19:34) was regularly seen as removing the sword which



guarded the entrance to Paradise, as we can see from one of St Ephrem's hymns:

Blessed is the Merciful One who saw the sword beside Paradise, barring the way to the Tree of Life. He came and took to himself a body which was wounded so that, but the opening of his side, he might open up the way to Paradise. (Hymns on the Nativity, VIII. 4)

The thief has a difficult time trying to persuade the Cherub to let him in, and it is only when he produces his trump card – the cross which he is carrying, that the Cherub finally makes way for him to enter, for the cross proves to be the key which opens the gate to Paradise.

The dialogue between the Cherub and the Thief is still acted out at Easter in some Chaldean churches in Iraq.

#### For further reading

A general introduction can be found in my 'Dialogue hymns of the Syriac Churches', in *Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review* 5:2 (1983), pp. 35-45, and 'The dramatic dimension of Syriac liturgical poetry', in *The Maronites: a Living Icon* (Diocese of St Maron, USA, 1985), pp. 27-41. A collection of Syriac texts, entitled *Soghyatha mgabbyatha*, is published by the Monastery of St Ephrem (Glane, Holland, 1982), and details of the provenance of these texts are to be found in my 'Syriac dialogue poems: marginalia to a recent edition', in *Le Muséon* 97 (1984), pp. 29-58.

#### Zechariah and the Angel

1. The feast came round for this Zechariah:  
- the subject of our poem-,  
to enter the Holy of Holies  
and bring atonement for his people.

Response: Praise to you, O Lord,  
whom heaven and earth joyfully worship.

2. When Zechariah had entered before the Lord  
to fulfil his service  
by offering incense on the altar  
and partaking of atonement,
3. at that time he beheld an angel of the Lord  
who appeared to him  
to the right of the altar of incense  
- and he trembled in fear of him.
4. He saw him standing there, glorious  
and in great resplendence, and he trembled.  
The spiritual being approached,  
reassuring him with gentle and humble speech.

Angel

5. Fear not, Zechariah,  
for the occasion is good that has come to you:  
the Lord is pleased with your prayer  
and has sent me to give you good tidings,
6. for the two of you, you and Elizabeth your wife,  
have done well before the Lord;  
and now she is pregnant and will bear you a child  
at whom you and many will rejoice.
7. No wine or strong drink shall he taste:  
he shall be called the Lord's Nazirite.  
While still in the womb  
the Lord will fill him with the Holy Spirit and  
consecrate him.

8. John shall be the name of the fruit  
which Elizabeth shall bear;  
he shall clear a way before the Lord,  
leaping before him as His messenger.
9. These are the words which Zechariah heard  
from the angel beside the altar,  
but he doubted at his presence  
and did not believe his message.
- Zechariah 10. How, sir shall this be,  
that Elizabeth should have a child.  
She is old, and barren too;  
and I am old, as you can see.
- Angel 11. The Watcher says: "Listen, Zechariah,  
accept the message you hear from me:  
it is not difficult before the Lord  
for a barren old woman to give birth.
- Zechariah 12. We should compare a woman to the ground:  
when it is sown it produces a crop,  
but if it has totally failed to do so,  
there is no hope left for it: it will not produce.
- Angel 13. For what reason do you doubt and not give  
credence?  
Why is it difficult for you to believe me?  
In the Lord's hands it is possible  
for something to be established out of nothing.
- Zechariah 14. It is patently impossible,  
as clear to me as the sun.  
She did not give birth when she was a young  
woman,  
so how can she do so in her old age?
- Angel 15. I have revealed to you a mystery ordained by  
the Lord;  
I have told you, and you should not dispute.  
But if you do dispute if and fail to believe,  
then you should fear the judgement of Him who  
sent me.

- Zechariah 16. It would be astonishing if I were to believe you  
in the matter of this tale you have told me:  
a tree already dried up  
cannot possibly provide fruit.
- Angel 17. You should realize, Zechariah, what a mistake  
you have made,  
you have not considered what has happened in  
the past;  
take the Scriptures and read in them  
of all the wonders the Lord has performed.
- Zechariah 18. It is certainly clear that the Lord is able,  
and I am convinced that such things have indeed  
taken place,  
but they were required by those times,  
and it was for that reason the Lord acted.
- Angel 19. You know that the Lord has done these things  
and that they took place because they were  
required—  
but it is also because it is requisite now  
that Elizebeth is pregnant and will give birth
- Zechariah 20. If these things took place in former ages  
it was because the world was young,  
but now that it has grown mature  
what is the need for a miracle?
- Angel 21. If the world was not in need  
of this miracle when it takes place  
the Lord would not have sent me here  
and I would not have had to bring you the  
message.
- Zechariah 22. It is already harvest time  
as far as I and Elizebeth are concerned;  
there is no use for someone sowing seeds  
when it is time for winnowing: that is quite  
out of place.

- Angel 23. Yes, the harvest time has indeed arrived  
as you have just said:  
you will see a fruit for Elizebeth  
and you will be filled with wonder when  
it happens.
- Zechariah 24. I can see that you are very glorious  
and your radiance is more resplendant than  
that of anyone earthborn,  
but however great and glorious you may be  
I find your words hard to accept.
- Angel 25. Take a look, Zechariah, and examine carefully,  
look at Abraham from whom you descend:  
he was an old man, and his wife  
was barren as well, yet she gave birth.
- Zechariah 26. What you have told me about Abraham  
is perfectly clear:  
in that case it happened out of necessity,  
so that his people might be blessed in his seed.
- Angel 27. You are quite wrong, Zechariah, do not be so  
slow;  
the longer you hold out, the worse it will be for  
you.  
You would do better to believe,  
and so give praise to Him who has sent me.
- Zechariah 28. The Lord knows what is hidden  
and all thoughts are revealed before him:  
even if I should accept your words with my lips,  
my heart is still unwilling to listen to you.
- Angel 29. This day is the most glorious  
of all the days of the year for you both:  
in the same way your son shall be exalted  
above all children born by women.
- Zechariah 30. However much you speak trying to persuade me,  
your words still do not reach my intellect:  
Elizabeth is smitten with two ills -  
old age and barrenness, both at once.

- Angel 31. Likewise when the message was given to Sarah  
these same two things applied -  
old age and barrenness together;  
yet because the Lord so willed it, she bore a son.
- Zechariah 32. Would that my intellect consented, sir,  
and that my doubt was uprooted;  
for it is quite clear to me that the Lord is able,  
yet I find it difficult to give credence to your  
word.
- Angel 33. I wish you had never questioned it, Zechariah,  
you really should believe me;  
Isaiah prophesied about your son  
long ago, as he was instructed.
- Zechariah 34. Who am I in this world  
to father the fruit me promised?  
However much you tell it me, I will not  
believe it  
because I know that it will not happen.
- Angel 35. Your son shall be a messenger  
before the face of the Most High;  
he will clear a path before the Lord,  
he will cry out and say 'Repent and turn back'.
- Zechariah 36. I went up to the temple to please my Lord  
and offer incense before his altar;  
I did not realize I would hear in the temple  
these things that are quite beyond my ken.
- Angel 37. I will proclaim a novel tidings to you,  
then may be my words will be acceptable to you:  
I am Gabriel  
who serves before the Lord.
38. As long as you still do not believe what I  
have said  
and my words do not appear true in your mind,  
you shall be silent and dumb  
until these things have taken place in deed;

39. until Elizabeth gives birth  
and the child that issues from her is perfected  
your mouth shall be bound, without speech,  
and so will the gates of your ears, unable to hear.
40. Your mouth will be loosed only then,  
when all this that you have heard takes place;  
and the gates of your ears will be opened  
along with your tongue when it is loosed.
41. The angel expounded his message,  
bound him, and left him in the temple –  
while all the people were astonished  
at his delay in the temple.
42. The crowd was thirsting with eagerness  
for Zechariah to come out from the temple.  
But when he did come forth, then they saw he  
was dumb;  
he motioned to them that he had seen a vision.
43. Entire Sion was amazed  
at what had happened to the upright priest.  
They understood that he had seen a vision,  
but what he had beheld they did not know.
44. They all stood up and stared  
while Zechariah, confident in their midst,  
indicated to them with his fingers  
the awesome vision seen by him.
45. Great is the word he heard  
from the angel who had appeared to him,  
but he was unable to recount it  
and did not know how to convey it in signs.
46. They all put questions to him, but he could  
not hear,  
seeing that he was dumb, having lost his speech.  
They made signs to him to tell them what he  
had seen,  
even though he was unable to speak.

47. Astonishment reigned  
among the Hebrews at all this;  
whether seated or standing,  
their minds were occupied with the affair.
48. They were amazed and full of wonder  
as they spoke to one another:  
'What sort of son will this be,  
when all this takes place at his conception?'

## II

### The Angel and Mary

O Power of the Father who came down and dwelt,  
 compelled by his love, in a virgin's womb,  
 grant me utterance that I may speak  
 of this great deed of yours which cannot be  
 grasped.

2 O Son of the Bounteous One, whose love so willed  
 that he should reside in a poor girl's womb,  
 grant me utterance and words  
 that in due wonder of you I may speak.

3 To tell of you the mouth is too small,  
 to describe you the tongue quite inadequate,  
 voice and words are too weak  
 to relate your beauty, so please did me tell of you.

4 Grant that I may approach, O Lord of All,  
 in awe to that exalted place  
 of the chief of the angels when he announced  
 to the young mother your coming

5 O you who are discerning, come, listen and give ear  
 to this action so entirely filled with wonder;  
 sing glory to him who has bent down  
 to give life to Adam who had sinned and died.

6 The Father in his mercy beckoned to his Child  
 to descend and deliver what he had once fashioned,  
 and to Gabriel the angel did he instruct  
 to prepare the path before his descent.

7 With David's daughter did mercy shine out,  
 for she was to be mother of him  
 who had given birth to Adam and to the whole world,  
 and whose name is older than the sun.

8 That will which cannot be grasped flew down  
 to summon the angel, sending him out  
 from the angelic hosts on his mission here  
 to bring the glad news to a virgin pure.

9 A letter did he bring that had been sealed  
 with the mystery which from all ages had been  
 hidden;  
 he filled it with greeting to the young girl  
 and fair hope for all the worlds.

10 Down flew the fiery one till he reached  
 the destitute girl, to fill her with wealth;  
 a greeting did he give her, announcing to her too  
 concerning her conception, the cause of wonder  
 to all.

Angel 11. To the virgin did the angel thus say  
 'Peace be with you, O mother of my Lord;  
 blessed are you, child,  
 and blessed the fruit within you'.

Mary 12. Says Mary 'who are you, sir,  
 and what is this that you utter?  
 What you are saying is remote from me,  
 and what it means I have no idea'.

Angel 13. O blessed of women, in you it has pleased  
 the Most High dwell; have no fear,  
 for in you has Grace bent down  
 to pour mercy upon the world.

Mary 14. I beg you, sir, do not upset me:  
 you are clothed with coals of fire, mind you  
 don't burn me.  
 What you have said is alien to me,  
 I am quite enable to grasp what it means.

Angel 15. The Father has revealed to me, as I do so now  
 to you,  
 this mystery which is shared  
 between him and his Son, when he sent me to say  
 that from you will he shine out over the worlds.

- Mary 16. You are flame, don't frighten me,  
you are wrapped in coals of fire, don't terrify me.  
O fiery one, how should I believe you  
when all that you have spoken to me is totally  
new?
- Angel 17. It would be amazing if you were to answer back,  
annulling the message which I have brought to  
you  
concerning the conception of the Most High  
whose will it is to dwell in your womb.
- Mary 18. I am afraid, sir, to accept you,  
for when Eve, my mother, accepted  
the serpent who spoke as a friend  
from her former glory was she snatched away.
- Angel 19. My daughter, he certainly did use deception  
on your mother Eve when he gave her the  
message,  
but I, just as certainly, am not deceiving you,  
seeing that it is the True One by whom I have  
been sent.
- Mary 20. All this that you say  
is most difficult, so do not find fault with me,  
for it isn't from a virgin that a son will appear  
— nor from that fruit a being who is divine.
- Angel 21. The Father gave me this meeting here  
to bring you the salutation and to announce  
to you  
that from your womb his Son will shine forth,  
so do not answer back in contrariness.
- Mary 22. This meeting with you and your presence here  
is all very fine,  
if only the natural order did not stir me  
to have doubts at your arrival  
about how in a virgin there can be fruit.

- Angel 23. The angelic hosts quake at his word:  
the moment he has commanded they do not  
answer back;  
how is it then that you are not afraid  
to query the thing that the Father has willed?
- Mary 24. I too quake, sir, and am terrified,  
yet though I fear I find it hard to believe  
since nature itself can well convince me  
that virgins do not ever give birth.
- Angel 25. It is the Father's love that has so willed  
that in your virginity you should give birth to  
the Son;  
it is appropriate that you should keep silent,  
and have faith too,  
for the will of the Father cannot be gainsaid.
- Mary 26. Your appearance is venerable, your message full  
of awe,  
your flames are leaping up;  
into the person of your Lord one cannot inquire,  
but that I should believe this is still difficult.
- Angel 27. It is good news that I have brought you,  
you shall give birth to your Lord, as I have  
explained;  
o child, give thanks to him who has held  
you worthy  
to be his mother having him as your son.
- Mary 28. I am but a girl  
and cannot receive a man of fire;  
the matter you speak of is hidden from me,  
yet you proclaim that I should accept it.
- Angel 29. To-day for Adam hope has arrived,  
for in you is the Lord of all pleased  
to come down and release him, granting him  
liberty.  
Accept my words, at the same time give thanks.

- Mary 30. To-day I wonder and am truly amazed  
at all these things of which you have spoken  
to me;  
yet I am afraid, sir, to accept you,  
in case there be some deceit in what you say.
- Angel 31. When I was sent to announce to you  
I heard his greeting and I brought it to you.  
My Lord is true, for he has so willed  
to shine forth from you over the worlds.
- Mary 32. All your words quite astonish me,  
I beg you sir, do not blame me,  
for a son in a virgin is not to be seen,  
and no one has ever slept with me.
- Angel 33. He will come to you, have no fear,  
he will reside in your womb, ask not how.  
O woman full of blessings, sing praise  
to him who was pleased to be seen in you.
- Mary 34. Sir, no man has ever known me  
nor any ever slept with me;  
how can this be, what you have said  
for without such union there will be no sone?
- Angel 35. From the Father was I sent  
to bring you this message, that his love has  
compelled him  
that in your womb his Son should reside,  
and over you shall the Holy Spirit reside.
- Mary 36. In that case, o angel, I will not answer back:  
if the Holy Spirit shall come to me,  
I am his maidservant, and he has authority;  
let it be to me, Lord, in accordance with your  
word.
- Angel 37. Let your head be raised up, o maiden,  
let your heart rejoice, o virgin;  
o second heaven, let the earth  
rejoice in you, for in your Son does it gain peace.

- Mary 38. Let my head be raised up, sir, as you have said.  
As I rejoice I shall confess his name,  
for if you - his servant - are so fair,  
what might he be like? Tell, if you can.
- Angel 39. This is something the angel hosts are unable to do  
- to gaze on him, for he is most fearful;  
hidden is he in his Father's flame,  
and the heavenly bands all hold him in awe.
- Mary 40. You greatly disturb me now,  
for if, as you say, he is all flame  
how will my womb not be harmed  
by the fire residing there?
- Angel 41. Your womb will be filled with sanctity  
sealed with the hidden divinity:  
a place that is holy is greatly beloved  
by God as a place where to appear.
- Mary 42. O angel, reveal to me why it has pleased  
your Lord to dwell in a mere poor girl:  
the world is full of king's daughters,  
so why does he want me, who am totally  
destitute?
- Angel 43. It would have been easy for him to dwell  
in a rich girl,  
but it is with your poverty that he has fallen  
in love,  
so that he may become one with the poor  
and enrich them when he has been revealed.
- Mary 44. Explain to me, sir, if you know this,  
when does he wish to come to me?  
And will he appear to me like fire  
when he resides in me as you have said?
- Angel 45. Already he has so willed it, he is come and is  
dwelling within you:  
lest you be frightened you remained unaware.  
I dare not look upon you now  
that you are filled with the Fire that does not  
consume.



- Mary 46 I should like, sir, to put this question to you:  
explain to me the ways of my son  
who resides within me without my being aware,  
what should I do for him so that he is not held  
in contempt?
- Angel 47 Cry out 'Holy, holy, holy'.  
just as our heavenly legions do, adding nothing  
else,  
for we have nothing besides this 'Holy',  
this is all we utter concerning your Son.
- Mary 48 Holy and glorious and blessed is his name,  
for he has looked upon his handmaid's low estate;  
henceforth all generations in the world  
shall proclaim me blessed.
- Angel 49 Height and depth shall sing out to him,  
angels and men shall give him praise,  
for he, Lord of all, has come down  
and dwelt in a virgin, to make all things new.
- Mary 50 Great is his mercy and not to be measured,  
far beyond what lips can describe.  
On high the heavens cannot contain him,  
yet down below for him a womb suffices.
- 51 Let heaven and earth call him blessed,  
let angel and virgin,  
and all mankind too, call him holy,  
for in his love he has descended and become man.
- 52 Let heaven and angels give thanks on high,  
let earth rejoice in the virgin,  
let both sides, as they exult,  
give praise to the Son of their Lord.
- 53 Let both sides be mingled in praise,  
angels together with men,  
to the Son who has restored to them peace  
when between them there had been disruption  
and anger.
- 54 Thanks be to you, Lord,  
from all the fiery invisible worlds,  
from every mouth in this world too  
let the earth sing its praises to you.

## III

## Hymn on our Lord and John

1. My imagination wafted me to the Jordan  
where I beheld a wonder  
when the glorious Bridegroom was revealed  
to make a marriage feast for the Bride and  
to sanctify her
- Refrain: Praise to you, Lord, whom heaven and earth  
worship in joy.
2. I saw John, filled with astonishment,  
with crowds standing round him  
while the glorious Bridegroom bent down  
before the child of barren parents to be  
baptized.
  3. My mind was amazed at both Word and Voice:  
John was the Voice,  
our Lord, who shone forth, was like the word  
ready to come out into the open, having been  
hidden.
  4. The Bride was betrothed, but she knew not  
who was the Groom she was to expect.  
The wilderness was filled with the wedding guests  
assembled,  
and hidden among them there was our Lord.
  5. It was then that the Groom revealed Himself,  
coming to John by the river  
The berald trembled as he announced  
'Here is the Groom whom I have been  
proclaiming'.
  6. There came to baptism He who baptizes all,  
manifesting Himself by the Jordan.  
John beheld Him and withdrew his hand,  
using supplement words, as follows:

- John 7. How is it, Lord, that You should be baptized,  
for at your baptism You bring forgiveness  
to all.  
The Font looks expectantly towards you;  
sprinkle in it sanctification and it will be  
perfected.
- Jesus 8. Our Lord spoke: I have willed it  
approach and baptize me, that my will be done.  
Resist my will you cannot;  
I shall be baptized by you for thus have I  
willed.
- John 9. I beg you, Lord, let me not be compelled:  
what You ask is hard;  
it is I who need to be baptized by you,  
for you with Your hyssop, make all things  
white.
- Jesus 10. I have asked, for it has pleased me that it should  
be so;  
why then, John, do you dispute it?  
Let what right demands to fulfilled;  
come, baptize me; why do you stand there?
- John 11. How can mere straw which is like tinder  
grasp fire in its hands?  
O Being of fire, have pity on me  
let me not come near, it is so hard for me.
- Jesus 12. I have revealed to you from the start my will;  
draw near and baptize me, you will not get  
burnt.  
The bridal chamber is ready, do not hold me back  
from the wedding feast that lies prepared.
- John 13. The angels are afraid and do not dare  
to gaze upon You, for fear of being blinded;  
how then can I, Lord, baptize You?  
I am too weak to draw near: please do not  
reproach me.

- Jesus 14. You should be afraid of disputing my will,  
going against what I have asked.  
Baptism awaits me expectantly:  
fulfil the task to which you were called.
- John 15. I proclaimed you by the Jordan  
in the hearing of the people who are not easily  
persuaded;  
if now they see You baptized by me  
they will doubt that you are the Lord.
- Jesus 16. I will be baptized while they look on,  
for the Father who sent me will testify  
that I am His Son in whom He is well pleased.  
He will bring reconciliation to Adam who had  
earned His wrath.
- John 17. It is proper, Lord, that I should recognize my  
true nature,  
seeing that I am fashioned out of earth,  
where as You are the fashioner, who gives shape to  
all.  
How can I baptize You in the water?
- Jesus 18. It is proper you should know why I have come  
and for what reason I have requested you to  
baptize me:  
this is the middle point of the path I have trod;  
let baptism not be withheld.
- John 19. The river You have come to is too small  
for You to stop there and it contain You:  
heaven cannot suffice for Your might,  
so how can the water of baptism hold You?
- Jesus 20. The womb is yet smaller than the Jordan,  
yet of my own will I dwelt in the Virgin.  
Just as I was born from the womb,  
so shall I be baptized in the Jordan.
- John 21. The heavenly armies stand by,  
serried ranks of angels, in worship:  
if I should approach to baptize You,  
I shall tremble with fright.

- Jesus 22. These crowds of heavenly powers  
consider you blessed for baptizing me.  
It for this I chose you from the womb:  
have no fear, for I have willed it.
- John 23. I have prepared the way for which I was sent,  
I have betrothed the Bride as I was hidden.  
Let Your Epiphany increase in the world  
now that You are come; but I will not  
baptize You.
- Jesus 24. This is the very preparation I have wished for  
that I should go down and be baptized in the  
water,  
forging armour for those to be baptized,  
that they may look upon me and not be  
vanquished.
- John 25. Why should I baptize the Child of the Father,  
seeing that You are in Your Father and He  
in You.  
You give sanctification to priests,  
so why are You asking for ordinary water?
- Jesus 26. The children of Adam are looking to me  
to give them new birth:  
I shall tread out in the waters a paxth for them,  
and, unless I am baptized, this cannot be done.
- John 27. Pontiffs are sanctified by You,  
by Your hyssop priests are whitened;  
You make anointed kings,  
so how can baptism benefit You?
- Jesus 28. The Bride whom you betrothed to me is expecting  
me to go down to baptism, and then I shall  
sanctify her.  
O friend of the Bridegroom, please do not refuse  
this washing which awaits me.
- John 29. I cannot, for I am too weak,  
hold in my hands Your flame.  
Your legions are made of fire:  
tell one of the angels to give baptism to You.

- Jesus 30. It is not from the angels that my body was taken,  
otherwise I might have called an angel to  
baptize me.  
No, it is Adam's body with which I am clothed,  
and you, a child of Adam, shall baptize me.
- John 31. The waters saw You and greatly feared,  
the waters have seen You and are trembling,  
the very river shook with fright,  
why should I, so frail, give You baptism?
- Jesus 32. The waters will be sanctified at my baptism,  
fire and spirit will they receive from me;  
unless I am baptized they will not fulfil their  
proper role  
of bearing as fruit immortal offspring.
- John 33. If fire should approach Your Fire  
it will get burnt up like tinder.  
Mount Sinai could not endure You,  
so how can I in my frailty baptize You?
- Jesus 34. I am indeed burning fire,  
but for the sake of man I became a child  
in a novel womb—a virgin's,  
and now I am to be baptized in the Jordan.
- John 35. It would be much best if You baptized me,  
for You possess the sanctification that can  
purify all:  
by You are the unclean made holy.  
why then should You, who are holy, come  
to baptism?
- Jesus 36. It would be most appropriate if you gave me  
baptism,  
just as I say, without contradicting:  
I baptized you in the womb,  
so do you baptize me in the Jordan.

John 39. The very air is carrying a garment of light  
in readiness for You, above the Jordan;  
so if it is agreed and You wish to be baptized,  
baptize Yourself and accomplish all.

John 41. How then, as You are being batized,  
can I seal prayer by the Jordan,  
since in You are to be seen both Father and Spirit:  
whom, then, as a priest, can I invoke?

John 13. All the guests who are standing here,  
invited by You, the Groom, will bear witness  
that each day I announced in their midst  
'I am the voice, and not the Word'.

Jesus 44. O Voice crying in the wilderness,  
perform the task for which you came  
so that the wilderness, to which you set out,  
may taunter at the prosperity you have  
there proclaimed.

John 47. I will obey, Lord, and do as You say.  
Come, then, to baptism, since Your love has  
so urged You:  
dust gives You worship - to what heights has  
it come  
that it should place a hand on its Maker:

49. The gates of heaven were flung open on high  
as the Father's voice made itself heard:  
'Here is my beloved, in whom I am pleased;  
come, all you nations, and worship him'.

50. In amazement the on lookers stood there  
as the Spirit came down to witness to Him.  
Thanks be to Your Epiphany, O Lord who give  
joy to all.  
for at Your appearance both worlds are  
illuminated.

## IV

## The Cherub and the Thief

1. At the Crucifixion I beheld a marvel  
when the thief cried out to our Lord  
"Remember me, my Lord, on the day when  
you come  
to that kingdom which does not pass away".

Refrain: Praise to you, Lord, for at your coming  
sinners turned back from their wickedness,  
they entered and found shelter  
in the Garden of Eden - which is the holy  
Church.

2. He made a petition, stretched out and gave it  
to the crucified King, asking for mercy,  
and He who is full of mercy heard his cry  
and opened the door to his request.
3. "Remember me, Lord," did he call out on the  
cross  
"in that kingdom which does not pass away,  
and in that glory in which you will be revealed  
may I behold your rest, seeing that I have  
acknowledged you".
4. Our Lord replied "Because you have acknow-  
ledged me  
this very day you shall be in the Garden of Eden;  
in very truth, man, you will not be kept back  
from that kingdom towards which you look.
5. "Take with you the cross as a sign, and be off:  
it is the great key whereby the great gate  
of that garden shall be opened,  
and Adam, who has been expelled, shall enter  
again".

6. The word of our Lord was sealed  
like a royal missive from the palace;  
it was handed over to the thief  
who took it and made off for the Garden of Eden.
  7. The Cherub heard and rushed up;  
he grabbed the thief at the gate,  
stopping him with the sharp blade he held.  
All astonished, he said as follows:
- Cherub 8. "Tell me, my man, who has sent you?  
What is it you want, and how did you come?  
What reason summoned you here?  
Reveal and explain to me who has sent you.
- Thief 9. "I will tell you who sent me;  
just hold back your blade and listen to my words.  
I am a thief, but I supplicated for mercy,  
and it was your Lord who sent me on my way  
here.
- Cherub 10. By what power did your coming take place?  
Who brought you to this dread spot?  
Who transported you across the sea of fire  
so that you could enter Eden? Who is it who  
has sent you?
- Thief 11. It was through the power of the Son, who  
sent me,  
that I crossed over and came here without  
hindrance.  
Through him I subdued all powers  
and I have come to enter here, seeing that he  
has given me confidence.
- Cherub 12. You are indeed a thief, just as you have said,  
but our region cannot be stolen into:  
it is fenced in with the sword that guards it.  
Turn back, man, you have lost your way.
- Thief 13. I was indeed a thief, but I have changed:  
it was not to steal that I came here.  
Look, I have upon me the key to Eden,  
to open it up and enter, and I will not be  
prevented.

- Cherub 14. Our region is awesome and cannot be trodden,  
for fire is its indomitable wall;  
the blade flashes out all around it.  
How is it you have made bold to come here?
- Thief 15. Your region is awesome, just as you have told me  
– but only until our Lord mounted the cross,  
when he transfigured the sword of all suffering  
so that your blade no longer kills.
- Cherub 16. Ever since the time that Adam left  
I have never seen anyone turn up here:  
your race has been banished from the Garden.  
You will not enter it, so do not argue any more.
- Thief 17. Ever since the time that Adam left  
your Lord was angered at our race,  
but now he is reconciled and has opened up the  
gate.  
You are standing here to no purpose at all.
- Cherub 18. You should realize that it is not possible  
for an unclean man to enter in here  
– and you are a murderer, and one who sheds  
blood.  
Whoever has brought you to this pure place?
- Thief 19. You should realize that such is the wish  
of Him who makes the unclean clean, who was  
crucified with me;  
with the blood of his side did He thoroughly  
cleanse and wash me.  
It was He who has sent me to Paradise.
- Cherub 20. Be off with you, man, and do not argue any more,  
for thus have I been commanded  
to guard from your race by means of the sword  
the Tree of Life that is to be found in here.
- Thief 21. Be off with you, angel; learn and see  
that I have left behind hanging on Golgotha  
the Fruit of salvation that is in your garden  
– so that our race may enter without any  
hindrance.

- Cherub 22. Eve and Adam fell into debt and wrote out  
a document that will not be erased:  
under sentence did they go out from here  
to live in humble estate in the land of thorns.
- Thief 23. The debt is repaid; just listen, O Cherub:  
the document has now been transfigured on the cross.  
With both blood and water has your Lord wiped  
it out,  
He has pinned it with nails and it will not be  
exacted.
- Cherub 24. Adam was driven out from this Garden  
and there is no means where by he can reenter  
here,  
for the blade of the sword revolves  
and it will meet him if he should come near.
- Thief 25. He who was driven out has returned to his  
father's house,  
for the Great Shepherd has gone out and found  
that sheep that had left the Garden,  
and, carrying him on his shoulders, He has  
escorted him back.
- Cherub 26. Today it is something novel that I have seen:  
– a track entering inside the garden.  
But here are Adam's footprints, take a look;  
he left here and has not returned again.
- Thief 27. Jesus your Lord has performed a novel deed,  
for He has now released Adam who had been  
confined;  
He has raised up whole crowds from inside Sheol,  
and they sent me in advance so that I might  
open up for them.
- Cherub 28. I am a cherub, and how is it you have transgressed  
against my office of guarding, with which I have  
been entrusted?  
A fiery being cannot be vanquished,  
but as for you, son of Adam, how bold you are

- Thief 29. I am your companion and we have but one Lord  
who is in common for both me and for you:  
his authority is higher than either yours or mine,  
and so I have no fear, for it was He who sent me.
- Cherub 30. You simply cannot enter here,  
for it is a resplendent place that no one can tread:  
the Shechina is escorted around inside it,  
and the sword of fire guards it.
- Thief 31. You cannot hold anyone back,  
for the sword is now blunted and dulled.  
The cross has opened up the Garden of Eden;  
there is no means by which it can still be closed.
- Cherub 32. Have you not heard from Scripture  
how the cherub and the sword go round  
guarding the way to the Garden of Eden  
so that none from Adam's house may enter?
- Thief 33. Have you not heard from the Revelation  
that your Lord came down and became man,  
thus reconciling Adam who was in a state of anger,  
bringing back to Eden the one who had been  
driven out?
- Cherub 34. The sign of the revolving sword  
that guards the Tree of Life  
frightened off Adam when he was driven out,  
so how is it that you are not afraid?
- Thief 35. The sign of your Lord is with me,  
and by it the sharp sword is blunted;  
by it too is the sentence remitted,  
and by it Adam, once driven out, shall return.
- Cherub 36. The ranks of fire are standing here,  
thousands of them, in bands innumerable;  
the multitudes are awesome, and you simply are  
unable  
to travel on and enter among them.

- Thief 37. The multitudinous ranks of which you have told me  
are themselves in awe as they look upon the cross:  
the sign of the Son inspires in the awe  
and they worship before it, while me they hold  
in honour.
- Cherub 38. The sign of my Lord is upon the Chariot,  
resplendent upon the Throne, but from us it is  
hidden,  
so how is it that you—as you are claiming—  
carry this sign of his and escort it?
- Thief 39. His sign is upon the Chariot above,  
but look, his cross is on Golgotha below.  
And with his own blood He has written a new  
missive  
allowing Adam to return inside the Garden.
- Cherub 40. O agent in blood, who has brought you here?  
Who has sent you, a murderer?  
The sword is drawn and if you make too bold  
the blade will flash out against you.
- Thief 41. O agent for the King, do not be upset;  
your authority is repealed, for your Lord has so  
willed it.  
It is the cross that I have brought to you as a sign:  
look and see if it is genuine, and do not be so  
angry.
- Cherub 42. This cross of the Son which you have brought to me  
I dare not look upon at all.  
It is both genuine and awesome; no longer will  
you be debarred  
from entering Eden, seeing that He has So willed.
- Thief 43. The cross of your Lord has breached the fence  
that had been built up between us and you.  
Anger has passed away and peace has come,  
and the path to Eden is no longer cut off.



